

# Is 'all dark and comfortless' in Euripides' *Trojan Women*?

Oliver Taplin

Greek Tragedy can be bleak reading. But the *Trojan Women* is bleaker than most. Oliver Taplin explores the mechanics of its pain and the redemptive power of music and poetry.

The women in Euripides' tragedy are caught in a limbo between fire and water, remanded in a kind of 'holding camp' between Troy and the Greek ships. To one side is the ransacked city, the home where they have known security and happiness, now wrecked and soon to be burned: to the other the ships lie at anchor, ready to take the victorious army home. And with them the Trojan women will have to go as slaves, doomed to a life of hard labour and sexual subjection – a life without rights or family. The play ends with their final, irreversible movement away from the flames of Troy and onto the shifting decks.

It is a relentlessly pain-filled play. The women have already lost their menfolk and their homes. Hecuba, the former queen, epitomizes their sufferings. First, she has to see her daughter Cassandra taken away to be the sex-slave of Agamemnon; then her daughter-in-law Andromache is hauled off to be the property of Neoptolemus, the man who slaughtered her husband Priam, and whose father Achilles killed Hector. Hecuba nourishes the vision that little Astyanax, the infant son of Hector and Andromache, might yet grow up to re-found Troy and restore the city to her former glory. Empty hopes: instead, Astyanax is prised from the arms of his mother to be hurled to his death from the walls of the ruined city. Hecuba's only comfort is to prepare his little broken body for burial. Comfortless comfort.

## Making sense of suffering

Well, what do you expect? This is a tragedy. And what Tragedy does is to turn human suffering into highly crafted words and action, and to face it without flinching. At the same time, most tragedies – most Greek tragedies at least – try to make some kind of sense of all this suffering; they seek ways to salvage it from mere gruesome meaninglessness. Yet is *Trojan Women* an exception? Is it nothing except unredeemed agony and humiliation?

One of the ways that Greek tragedies, especially those of Euripides, pull their stories back from nihilistic darkness is through the device of 'the god from the machine'. Towards the end of the play a god suddenly appears from on high, swung in on a kind of flying harness (hence 'the machine'); he or she proceeds to impose some degree of sense and shape onto the tragic events. Most often and prominently the god unveils an 'aetiology', that is to say a kind of just-so-story inaugurating something that still exists in the future, including the present-day world of the audience. In memorial for these terrible events, the god declares, a certain religious festival will be set up, or a certain landmark will get its name, or a certain custom will be observed, etc. So Artemis in *Hippolytus* predicts that for all future time the tale of the dying young hero will be recalled in Trozen the night before young women are married. She calls this 'a concern that will produce poetry' (lines 1428–9); and she adds that Phaedra's passion too will not be silenced and become 'nameless' (*anonymos*, 1429–30). Cold comfort, you might say, for Phaedra and Hippolytus, who both die unnaturally and wretchedly. But in

return it does allow them to leave some sort of mark in the world. Their stories will not be lost and forgotten: on the contrary, they will be celebrated and creatively remembered for ever.

## Staring desperation in the face

But *Trojan Women* has no god from the machine, and no declared aetiology. The gods in this play appear at the beginning, not the end: Athena and Poseidon set the tragedy up, but they do not wrap it up. Nobody reveals any comforting just-so-story. For Hecuba and the chorus, and, it is implied, for all the other captured women, the future will only bring unrelieved suffering and obscurity. They and their whole society will be lost without trace.

Indeed the play hammers home the total obliteration of the Trojans and of the city of Troy. The final scene (from line 1260 onwards) is triggered by the Greek command to send the remnants of the city up in flames. Hecuba laments:

*O how you proudly used to swell your breast  
among the Asian peoples, O my Troy!  
But soon you shall be stripped bare  
of your celebrated name (onoma).  
They're setting you on fire,  
and dragging us away from here as slaves.*

(1277–80)

And when she calls on Zeus to look upon their sufferings, the chorus responds:

*He looks on. But the mighty city is now dead, an un-city –  
Troy exists no more.*

(1291–2)

Not long after, they cry out to the town itself and its temples, where the flames are now taking their hold:

chorus:

*Any minute now you shall crash  
to your own ground, nameless (anonymoi).*

Hecuba:

*Dust, flying to the upper air like smoke,  
will make me oblivious of my own home.*

chorus:

*The very name (onoma) of the place shall disappear.  
Differing things vanish at differing times –  
poor Troy exists no more.*

(1319–24)

At the very end of the play, as the city crashes down into ashes, the women set off to board the waiting ships.

## Heightened sensibilities

So is 'all dark and comfortless' (to quote the blinded Gloucester in *King Lear*)? For Hecuba and the Trojan women the answer

must be 'yes'. But for the audience of Euripides' play? It is Euripides' Hecuba herself who offers a fleeting gleam of light among the lowering clouds of tragedy. Nothing like a rebuilt city, founded by a resurrected prince, but still 'a concern that will produce poetry'. After preparing the body of Astyanax for burial, and before the final sequence, Hecuba laments that, despite all their religious piety, it has turned out that Troy and the Trojans have been hated all along by the gods. 'But...', she adds:

*But had the god not grasped and overturned things  
all the wrong way up, we would have vanished,  
never been converted into song,  
providing themes for poets of future generations.*  
(1242–5)

These lines are not easy to integrate: Hecuba seems momentarily to step outside the time-frame of the play and look back from the future. And this motif seems to be completely forgotten by her and the chorus in the final scene, where, as we have seen, it is repeatedly lamented that Troy and the Trojans are indeed vanishing for ever.

But the idea should not be forgotten by the audience. Even as they hear the words,

*The very name of the place shall disappear*

the name of Troy is being perpetuated in poetry. Troy has been named again and again (more than 40 times) throughout the play – it is even preserved in its very title. And this is ratified every time the play is performed or read or talked about. Even as I write the word 'Troy', I am contradicting

*The very name of the place shall disappear.*

The sufferings of Troy and the Trojans are, in a sense, among the most privileged that the world has ever known. They became the subject of the *Iliad* ('Ilios' is, of course, another name for Troy, and is also repeated many times in *Trojan Women*). And, after the *Iliad*, the name and fate of Troy/Ilios have been immortalized again and again, from book 2 of the *Aeneid*, to the medieval *Roman de Troie*, to *Troilus and Cressida*, to *Les Troyennes* of Berlioz, to Christa Wolf's *Kassandra*, to the 2004 film *Troy*, to Alice Oswald's poem *Memorial*, published in October 2011. The death-agonies of Troy, and not least the sufferings of her women, have become the inexhaustible stuff of poetry, art, and music for all time.

In other words *Trojan Women* does include an aetiology – even though it is not delivered by a god and not explicitly spelled out. The play is, on one level, a just-so-story for the power of Troy in poetry. It is the very depth and sharpness of the tragic sufferings that make them worthy to be told and retold. The agonies of the women of Troy are very much there in the *Iliad*, especially at the end of the poem; and it is their bereavement and humiliation that have dominated Euripides' tragedy. They are so intense that they will be celebrated for all time.

### **Women and war**

Now, you might well object that it is all very well for us to memorialize these traumatized women from the comfort of our warm and secure lives; but that this is no comfort for them as they board the ships for a future of rape and servitude. And it is even colder comfort for all those thousands – no, millions – of women who have been, down to this day, the victims of war throughout the world. They are more profoundly 'anonymous'; they are annihilated, and leave little or no mark that they ever even existed. And they do not have plays made about their brief and grim lives.

But are they and their horrific sufferings lost without any trace whatever? Was their very existence 100% pointlessness and nothingness? To make a very big claim in very few words, I would want to suggest Tragedy itself, the art-form, salvages some mark, and tracks some trace of their existence. It nurtures a heightened awareness; it recognises the shadows of the hordes of those who

have unfairly suffered, both women and men. Tragedy cannot, of course, record their names or the particulars of their pain and maltreatment. But a sense that they have existed, that they have drawn breath from the air of this world, is, in some way, felt by audiences and readers whenever a tragedy moves them deeply. When we weep at *Trojan Women*, we are also weeping for all those innumerable others. The women of Troy, not obliterated but recalled through poetry and music, stand for every woman who has had her life damaged or destroyed by violence and war.

*Oliver Taplin was one of the founders of Omnibus and still contributes gems like this.*